

MySpace and Facebook: What You Should Know

Social networking sites keep growing in popularity. Here are 10 things to get parents up to speed.

by Patti Ghezzi



Parents used to hear about the dangers of Internet chat rooms. Now, they hear about far-reaching social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Friendster.

Social networking sites provide tools for adults and kids to connect and communicate. They allow you to create a profile, chat with friends, post photos, and share with the world what you had for breakfast and your philosophies on life.

These sites give kids a way to connect with people they know, but they also allow easy access from people they don't know. Strangers can use a student's profile to figure out where she goes to school, where she lives, what activities she participates in, and other personal information. Predators can use fake identities to give children a false sense of security and lure them into a meeting in person.

Yet networking sites, if used responsibly, can provide an outlet for kids to do what comes naturally to them: socialize. They serve as a creative outlet and can even improve written communication skills, says Ross Ellis, founder and CEO of Love Our Children USA, an organization to prevent child violence. Such sites also make it possible for kids to reconnect with friends they met at summer camp or classmates who have moved away.

Parents may be tempted to forbid their children to go near social networking sites—but doing so may prompt curious kids to explore them unassisted and unsupervised. Instead, help your child safely navigate the world of online social networking.

1. Talk to your child about Facebook, MySpace, and other sites. Don't wait for your child to bring it up; he probably already knows about them.
2. Get savvy. Many parents have heard of Facebook, but they have no idea what it is. Go online and set up profiles on Facebook, Friendster, and MySpace. Learn how the different sites operate. Familiarize yourself with the language and culture on each site. Try the [Internet Keep Safe Coalition's tutorial on social networking](#).
3. Check the rules for each site. If your child wants to set up a profile and is old enough under the site's rules, help her establish a page without revealing personal information.
4. Sites allow users to post a photo or personalized graphic (known as an avatar). Encourage your child to find an avatar that he feels reflects his personality, rather than a photograph. If he really wants to use a photo, choose one taken at a distance and make sure he's not wearing a team jersey or anything else that could reveal his location.
5. Some sites allow users to set privacy settings, allowing access only to select friends or those with a password. Such password-protected features may allow your child to post photos that only her friends can view.
6. Warn your child of the real dangers of ignoring safety precautions on Facebook and other sites—for example, someone finding out which school they go to or posting information about them in other places, such as pornography sites. "Parents shouldn't be afraid to broach the subject," Ellis says. "Children need to learn the consequences of their actions."
7. As further motivation for keeping children from posting photos on public sites, let them know that others may be able to download the photo, doctor it, and repost it elsewhere.
8. Users build an online profile on Facebook and other sites by inviting others via email to be their "friend." Instruct your child to always ask classmates in person whether they sent a friend invitation. It's not hard for a stranger to pose as a friend to gain access.
9. Just like video games or television, social networking sites can be a drain on a child's free time and a serious distraction. Limit the time your child spends on the computer, and only allow recreational use after homework is done.
10. Embrace the benefits of social networking technology. Set up your own profile and see how many classmates, coworkers, and friends you can find. Show your child the correct way to use online networking tools.

Social networking sites are proliferating, not going away. The more you know about networking technology, the better prepared you'll be to protect your child from potential dangers and to help your child take advantage of what these sites have to offer.